

Chapter 6

THE AGE OF REFORM

1830–1850



Focus Questions

- ★ How did the rise of evangelical Protestantism promote the reform movements of the 1830s and 1840s?
- ★ How did various personalities and philosophies divide the abolitionist movement in the 1830s and 1840s?
- ★ How did the reform movement make America a gentler society in the 1830s and 1840s?
- ★ How did the “cult of domesticity” both promote and restrain the women’s movement in the 1840s and 1850s?
- ★ How did the political reforms of the Age of Jackson clash with the social reforms of the era?

Summary

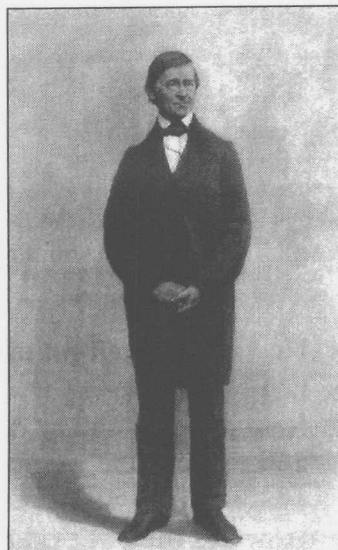
Responding to the transformation of American society after the War of 1812, reformers in the 1820s and 1830s began reconsidering the conventional thinking of their times. With the rise of the Market Revolution and the increase of urbanization and immigration in the 1820s, many Americans experienced uncertainty and anxiety as they confronted a rapidly changing society.

Sources of Reform

The Second Great Awakening addressed many of these feelings. Led by evangelical spokesmen such as Charles Finney, the movement preached spiritual rebirth, individual self-improvement, and perfectionism. Traveling in the "burned-over district" of western New York and throughout New England, these itinerant evangelists ignited a spirit of change with their ideas that moral rectitude could lead to salvation. This message provided part of the philosophical foundation for the reforms of the 1830s.

Along with the religious fervor of the times, the writings of the Transcendentalist writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau also fueled the spirit of reform. These authors and poets believed that truth was found beyond experience. They called on individuals to follow their conscience, to think for themselves, and to trust in their intuition.

Ironically, the Jacksonians, who rhetorically championed egalitarianism and political equity, opposed the reformers of the 1830s. Jackson and his followers were states' right advocates dedicated to reducing the reach of the central government. Reformers, on the other hand, wanted the central government to take an active role in confronting society's ills, especially the plague of slavery.



Ralph Waldo Emerson

Penal Reform and Utopian Societies

One aspect of the reforms of the 1830s and 1840s was improvement in the penitentiary and asylum systems. There was a growing desire to change the focus of prisons in America. States like New York and Pennsylvania moved away from incarceration as punishment and toward rehabilitation of prisoners. Dorothea Dix supported these efforts as she lobbied the states to remove mental patients from the prisons and house them in special hospitals and facilities where they could be treated rather than punished. Through her dedicated efforts, 28 of the 33 states had created public institutions for the mentally ill by 1860.

Another attempt to redeem the flawed society of the Jacksonian Era was the formation of alternative communities that featured communal living, collective ownership of property, and in some cases, unusual sexual practices. These utopian societies grew up in places such as Oneida, New York; New Harmony, Indiana; and Brook Farm, Massachusetts. Most of these radical experiments were short-lived, as the members found it difficult to share property, deal with celibacy, overcome the hostilities of local citizens, and maintain stable leadership. Only Oneida survived more than a few years.

Temperance and Women's Rights

The abuses of alcohol generated one of the strongest reform movements of the 1820s and 1830s. Drinking was a serious social problem that destroyed families, bred crime, and fostered disease. Temperance organizations quickly developed after reformers founded the American Society for the Promotion of Temperance in 1826. By the 1830s, there were over 5,000 state and local temperance groups. In 1851, the Maine Law made

Maine the first state in the Union to prohibit the sale and consumption of alcohol statewide. The temperance movement was strongly anti-immigrant in its message. It connected drinking and its abuses with foreigners, especially Irish Catholic and German immigrants. Temperance provided the Protestant middle class with a means to attack out-of-favor groups such as laborers, immigrants, and Catholics.

Although in the shadow of the abolitionist crusade, the women's movement flickered to life in this time as well. Led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, the first women's rights convention met in Seneca Falls, New York, in July 1848. This meeting inaugurated the quest for equal rights by passing the **Declaration of Sentiments**. Later joined by Susan B. Anthony, Stanton waged a futile campaign for women's suffrage throughout the nineteenth century. Hampered by subordination to the abolitionist movement, adherence to the "cult of domesticity," and divisions over black men's voting rights, women would not achieve the right to vote until 1920.

Abolition

Of all the reforms of the 1830s and 1840s, none had more energy or intensity than the abolitionist movement. This crusade dominated the era. While there had been earlier attempts to abolish slavery with the forma-

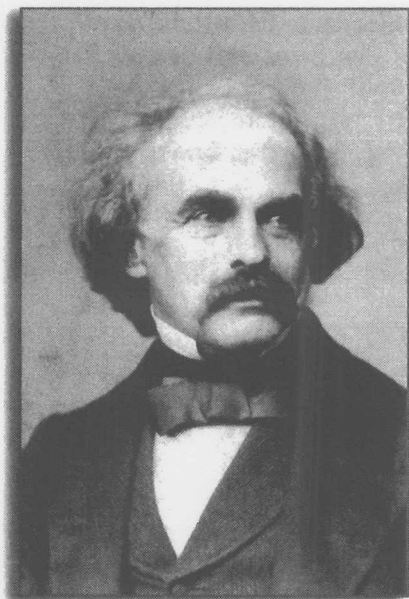
tion of the **American Colonization Society**, the movement began in earnest in 1831, when William Lloyd Garrison started his newspaper, *The Liberator*. In 1833, Garrison and his allies founded the influential **American Anti-Slavery Society**.

Garrison remained at the center of the abolitionist endeavor for the next thirty years. He recruited former slaves such as Frederick Douglass as agents, opposed compensation for the slaveholders, opposed political action by a government he believed hopelessly under the influence of the corrupt slaveholding interests, and championed an equal role for women in the movement. Garrison's uncompromising and extreme views caused division among the reformers. By 1840, a rival group of abolitionists broke with his positions. Led by Lewis and Arthur Tappan, the **American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society** was formed. It supported political action, embraced the Constitution, allied with churches, endorsed compensation for slaveholders, and opposed women's full participation in meetings. This struggle between Garrison and his critics dominated the abolitionist movement in the 1840s and 1850s.

Often reformers were involved in more than one type of reform. Many women who crusaded for gender equality received their training in the abolitionist movement. And other abolitionists supported a variety of reforms including temperance and penal reform. The goal of all these individuals was expansion of democracy and fulfillment of the ideals of the Declaration of Independence.

HIGHLIGHTS

of the Period



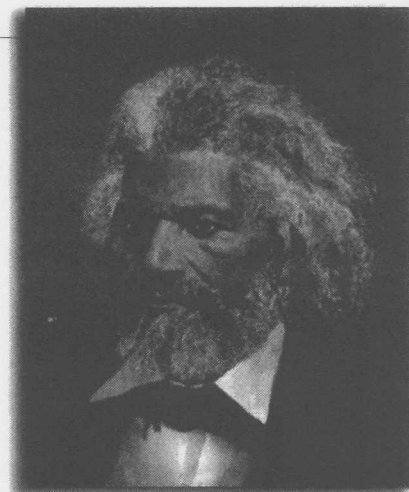
Nathaniel Hawthorne

- ★ **Abby Kelley** — effective public speaker in the American Anti-Slavery Society; her election to an all-male committee caused the final break between William Garrison and his abolitionist critics in 1840 that split the organization.
- ★ **American Anti-Slavery Society** — organization of reformers who embraced moral persuasion to end slavery; founded in 1833, it opposed gradual emancipation, rejected compensation to slaveholders, supported many types of reform, and welcomed women as full and active members.
- ★ **American Colonization Society** — organization founded in 1817 that advocated sending freed slaves to a colony in Africa; it established the colony of Liberia in 1827 and encouraged free African Americans to emigrate there as well.
- ★ **American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society** — organization founded in 1840 and led by the Tappan brothers that opposed the radical ideas of William Lloyd Garrison, especially his attacks on the churches and the Constitution; it followed a more moderate approach and supported the political activities of the Liberty Party.
- ★ **American Society for the Promotion of Temperance** — first national temperance organization, founded in 1826, which sent agents to preach total abstinence from alcohol; the society pressed individuals to sign pledges of sobriety and states to prohibit the use of alcohol.
- ★ **Brook Farm** — utopian society established by transcendentalist George Ripley near Boston in 1841; members shared equally in farm work and leisure discussions of literature and art. Author Nathaniel Hawthorne and others became disenchanted with the experiment, and it collapsed after a fire in 1847.
- ★ **Burned-over district** — area of New York State along the Erie Canal that was constantly aflame with revivalism and reform; as wave after wave of fervor broke over the region, groups such as the Mormons, Shakers, and Millerites found support among the residents.
- ★ **Charles Finney** — a leading evangelist of the Second Great Awakening; he preached that each person had capacity for spiritual rebirth and salvation, and that through individual effort one could be saved. His concept of “utility of benevolence” proposed the reformation of society as well as of individuals.
- ★ **Compensated Emancipation** — approach to ending slavery that called for slaveholders to be paid for the loss of their “property” as slaves were freed; such proposals were based on the belief that slaveholders would be less resistant to abolition if the economic blow were softened by compensation. A variety of such programs were proposed, some with the support of government leaders, up to and even during the Civil War. Some compensated emancipation existed on a very small scale, as some anti-slavery organizations purchased slaves and then set them free.

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- ★ **Cult of domesticity** — the belief that as the fairer sex, women occupied a unique and specific social position and that they were to provide religious and moral instruction in the home but avoid the rough world of politics and business in the larger sphere of society.
- ★ **Declaration of Sentiments** — series of resolutions issued at the end of the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848; modeled after the Declaration of Independence, the list of grievances called for economic and social equality for women, along with a demand for the right to vote.
- ★ **Dorothea Dix** — schoolteacher turned reformer; she was a pioneer for humane treatment of the mentally ill. She lobbied state legislatures to create separate hospitals for the insane and to remove them from the depravity of the penal system.
- ★ **Elizabeth Cady Stanton** — pioneer in the women's movement; she organized the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 and fought for women's suffrage throughout the 1800s.
- ★ **Frederick Douglass** — former slave who became an effective abolitionist with an authenticity to his speeches unmatched by other antislavery voices; initially a follower of William Lloyd Garrison, he broke away and started his own abolitionist newspaper, *The North Star*. From the 1840s to his death in 1895, he was the leading black spokesman in America.
- ★ **Gradual Emancipation** — approach to ending slavery that called for the phasing out of slavery over a period of time; many gradual emancipation proposals were built around the granting of freedom to children of slaves who were born after a specified date, usually when they attained a specified age; in this way, as existing slaves aged and died, slavery would gradually die too. Many of the northern states, which abolished slavery following the American Revolution, adopted this method of ending the institution.
- ★ **Horace Mann** — reformer who led a crusade to improve public education in America; as secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, he established a minimum school term, formalized teacher training, and moved curriculum away from religious training toward more secular subjects.
- ★ **James Birney** — former slaveholder who at one time was a member of the American Colonization Society, the American Anti-Slavery Society, and the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society; in 1840 and 1844, he ran for president on the Liberty Party ticket.
- ★ **Lewis and Arthur Tappan** — founders of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society; as successful businessmen, they funded many antislavery activities in the 1830s and 1840s. They also supported the Liberty Party in the 1840s.
- ★ **Liberty Party** — political party formed in 1840 that supported a program to end the slave trade and slavery in the territories and the District of Columbia; James Birney ran as the party candidate in 1840 and 1844. In 1848, it merged into the Free Soil Party.



HIGHLIGHTS

of the Period



- ★ **Lucretia Mott** — Quaker activist in both the abolitionist and women's movements; with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, she was a principal organizer of the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848.
- ★ **Maine Law (1851)** — first statewide attempt to restrict the consumption of alcohol; the law prohibited the manufacture and sale of alcohol except for medical reasons.
- ★ **Sarah and Angelina Grimke** — Quaker sisters from South Carolina who came north and became active in the abolitionist movement; Angelina married Theodore Weld, a leading abolitionist, and Sarah wrote and lectured on a variety of reforms including women's rights and abolition.
- ★ **Second Great Awakening** — period of religious revivals between 1790 and 1840 that preached the sinfulness of man yet emphasized salvation through moral action; it sent a message to turn away from sin and provided philosophical underpinnings of the reforms of the 1830s.
- ★ **Susan B. Anthony** — friend and partner of Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the struggle for women's rights; meeting in 1851, Anthony and Stanton founded the National Woman Suffrage Association after the Civil War. The Nineteenth Amendment, which extended the right to vote to women in 1920, is sometimes called the "Anthony" amendment.
- ★ **Transcendentalists** — writers who believed in the search for reality and truth through spiritual intuition; they held that man was capable of discovering truth without reference to established authority. This belief justified the reformers' challenges to the conventional thinking of their time.
- ★ **William Lloyd Garrison** — most prominent abolitionist leader of the antebellum period; he published the antislavery newspaper *The Liberator* and founded the American Anti-Slavery Society.

HIGHLIGHTS

of the Period

Ideas to Ponder

After reviewing the chapter's summary, highlights, and your primary text, discuss the following with members of your study group.

- 1 How did economic and social changes after the War of 1812 fuel the reforms of the 1830s?
- 2 How did religious developments promote the reforms of the 1830s?
- 3 How did the Market Revolution give rise to the developments of utopian societies in the 1830s and 1840s?
- 4 Why did the Jacksonians oppose many of the reforms of the 1830s?
- 5 Why was the "burned-over district" so involved in the reforms of the period?
- 6 Why did William Lloyd Garrison adopt such a radical approach to ending slavery?
- 7 Was Garrison a positive or negative force in ending slavery in America?
- 8 Why did the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society form?
- 9 What role did African Americans play in the abolitionist movement?
- 10 How did the formation of the Liberty Party change the nature of the abolitionist debate?
- 11 Did the American Colonization Society hurt the abolitionist crusade? Explain why or why not.
- 12 What was the attitude of most Americans toward the abolitionist movement?
- 13 Why did many Americans blame the abolitionists for the Civil War? Was this fair?
- 14 In what ways were the temperance reformers both progressive and repressive in their ideology and tactics?
- 15 Why were women unable to make significant improvement in their position in society before the Civil War?
- 16 In what ways could women identify with the plight of African-American slaves?
- 17 Why did the Whig Party support many of the social and economic reforms of the 1830s and 1840s?